

**Gender Equality Plans.
Processes, potentialities, contradictions
and resistances in contexts of science
production**

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1. Introduction. Putting the university under the gender lens

Observing the academic space through a gender lens, as an analytical category, means bringing to light the gender differences that are produced and reproduced in a specific work/organizational context that might be presumed to be neutral because it is based on principles such as ‘merit’ and ‘excellence’.

The study and analysis of gender asymmetries in academia has seen significant interest since the 2000s: several contextual - national and supranational - factors have stimulated scholarly debate in this direction.

On the European front, the EU has emphasized the centrality of knowledge-based economic development policies, within which gender equality has been defined as a central element, the guiding principle of economic development in its

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broadest sense (European Commission 2013). The launch of the European Research Area (ERA), through the construction of an “enhanced partnership for the European research area in favour of excellence and growth”, has underlined the centrality of gender equality objectives and detailed the dimensions to invest in: removing gender inequalities in careers; promoting a balance between women and men in decision-making processes and leadership positions; and strengthening the gender dimension in research programmes (European Commission 2012).

At the same time, the Italian academic context has undergone profound changes concerning national policies related to scientific careers. Starting from the 2000s, transformations in Italy began with three different measures: the adoption of evaluation systems for departments and universities; the so-called Gelmini Reform (Law no. 133/2008 and Law no. 169/2008); and cuts in public funds for Universities and Research, which also affected academic staff turnover (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020). Recent contributions (Picardi 2020; Gaiaschi 2021; Naldini and Poggio 2023) have highlighted how the confluence of these three factors have had repercussions in terms of gender perspectives, especially in the selection processes in the early stages of academic careers, particularly for temporary researcher positions. This has occurred within a framework where Italian universities have shifted towards a neoliberal type of knowledge production and dissemination, characterized by a conception of scientific productivity and its evaluation through specific parameters, such as competition (among researchers, departments, universities) and accountability (Poggio 2018; De Coster and Zanoni 2019; Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020).

Both in the national and supranational contexts, it is increasingly clear how gender asymmetries are present, rooted, and are products of processes inscribed in practices, as well as in organizational logics. This complex phenomenon persists in Europe and Italy, as evidenced by the main sources of data which monitor progress in gender equality in the research and innovation sector. According to the latest

She Figures report (European Commission 2021), for instance, in Europe (EU28), women Researchers and Full Professors in 2018 made up a total of 46% and 24%. The presence of women in academic careers tends to decrease when considering STEM disciplines: within the teaching and research staff of this area, Female Researchers represent 35% while Full Professors total just 15%¹. Looking at representation in decision-making bodies and managerial positions, women represent 27% and 20%, respectively, in all European Countries, Italy included, confirming the trend, observed over the years, of reduced female presence in academic governance bodies (Bozzon *et al.* 2015; Azzolina *et al.* 2023).

Gender imbalances in the academic context, briefly mentioned here, are interpreted in the literature through mechanisms operating on three interconnected levels: individual (micro), organizational (meso), and cultural (macro). Concerning the individual dimension, emphasis is placed on gender-characterized self-selection processes: various authors highlight the lower competitiveness, scientific productivity, and self-confidence of the female component (Croson and Gneezy 2009; Baccini *et al.* 2014; Pautasso 2015). This gender characterization involves publication strategies, division of time between research and teaching, and chosen fields of study. These aspects stem from socio-educational models as well as structural and organizational conditions within the academic space, where problems persist related to balancing workloads and caregiving burdens, exacerbated by the precariousness that accompanies the early stages of careers and that also lead to critical implications on the front of parenting choices and access to maternity and parental leave; all factors that can lead to career interruptions for women. Indeed, even though in Italy the availability of tools to address reconciliation problems is

¹ Regarding the Italian situation, in 2021, women made up a total of 41.1% among the teaching and research staff; however, while they accounted for 49% of those holding Postdoc positions, they were only about 26% of the full professors. With reference to STEM areas, the total share of female lecturers and researchers fell to 36.5%, with female researchers accounting for 41% of the total and female full professors for 22% (MUR 2023).

still limited (Naldini and Saraceno 2011), what truly matters, in our Country more than others, is the influence of gender stereotypes linked to parenthood, particularly motherhood, and the lack of discussion about fatherhood in both family and work policies and practices (Cannito 2022).

The reference to the organizational space suggests the second level of analysis, linked to organizational cultures (Murgia and Poggio 2019; Cannito *et al.* 2023), contexts that are not neutral regarding gender. Reference is made here to a masculinized model of worker (Blair-Loy 2003; Lund 2012; Brumley 2014), as well as specific recruitment and promotion procedures: the scientific literature on the subject suggests the presence of gender stereotypes and expectations from competition committee members, especially when the composition of these committees reproduces the predominantly male composition typical of the higher positions in academic careers (Pollard-Sacks 1999; Goastellec and Vaira 2016; Anzivino and Vaira 2018).

The third level of analysis, macro, refers to the construction of criteria such as “merit” and “excellence” (Addis and Villa 2003; Addis 2008; Anzivino *et al.* 2023). The former often does not include teaching activities, which usually involve more women (Gadforth and Kerr 2009); excellence, on the other hand, is usually measured in terms of publications, research activities, citations, and internationalization, characteristics that are not gender neutral.

Based on this framework, over the years, several instruments have been implemented to address existing gender inequalities, but it is with the launch of the European Research Area (ERA) that reference is made, for the first time, to Gender Equality Plans (GEP) as possible strategic planning documents.

In 2015, the EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) developed and made available the so-called GEAR (Gender Equality in Academia and Research), a tool dedicated to universities and research organizations, aimed at combating gender

inequalities through proposed actions and tools to initiate change within institutions (EIGE 2022). Among the tools mentioned in this document is the GEP. However, from 2021 onwards, with the launch of Horizon Europe, the European financing programme 'heir' of Horizon 2020, the implementation of a Gender Equality Plan became binding for higher education and research organizations to access this significant source of funding.

Gender Equality Plans involve a set of actions aimed at preventing, reducing, and countering gender imbalances and inequalities in research and innovation. The European Commission identifies five main intervention areas: recruitment and career progression; work-life balance; leadership and organizational culture; gender perspective in research and educational practices; and gender-based violence. The GEP is designed as a programming tool that fits within the planning cycle of European universities, within a broader framework of policies and interventions already activated within universities and research institutions for organizational well-being and gender equality. The GEP should not merely involve the design and implementation of measures and policies, but it is conceived as a tool to change processes, cultures, and organizational structures as a whole, in a perspective of gender mainstreaming. The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as a strategy for (re)organizing, improving, implementing, and evaluating decision-making processes at every level, with the goal of incorporating a gender equality perspective by the actors involved in policy design and implementation (European Commission 1996). A horizontal approach, therefore, emphasizes the need to reorganize policy-making processes within institutions that appear gender-blind; a strategy that focuses on gender equality and not on women as a "special category" (Vingelli 2005).

The GEP fits into this strategic framework alongside other tools: as mentioned, over time, several strategies have been pursued to promote gender-oriented changes within institutions. However, the implementation of such gender equality

policies is not without difficulties: Roggeband (2018) emphasizes that this is the result of a power play between resistances and counter-resistances, where efforts for change in practices and policies clash with continuous opposition (Verloo 2018; Waylen 2014), aiming to maintain the status quo (Lombardo and Mergaert 2013). At the same time, however, it is possible to observe the emergence of actions and practices from those actors promoting gender equality, to counter resistance and push towards a feminist institutional transformation (Eyben 2010; Eschle and Maignashca 2018; Chappell and Mackay 2020). Today, the relationship between gender and institutions is at the centre of a critical analysis from a Feminist Institutionalism perspective (Mackay *et al.* 2010; Krook *et al.* 2011), shedding light on what can be defined as the “rules of the game” (Krook and Mackay 2011) within institutions and how these rules, both formal and informal, have gender implications. Within this theoretical framework, positive changes related to gender in institutional processes (Chappell 2002; Mackay 2006, 2010; Mackay and McAllister 2012) are highlighted and analysed, as well as resistance and opposition practices around these same changes (Chappell 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Mackay 2014; Mackay and Waylen 2014). Feminist institutionalism does not simply integrate a gender perspective into understanding new institutional processes but questions the foundations of the institutions themselves (Kenny 2007), deeply intertwined with socio-cultural constructions linked to masculinity and femininity (Acker 1992; Krook and Mackay 2011). This theoretical approach is therefore useful when observing dynamics related to instruments such as GEPs: feminist institutionalism helps to understand the results of certain gender policies in institutions (or lack thereof), the relationships between institutions and actors, and the experiences of men and women within the institutions themselves (Chappell 2010).

Therefore, the perspective of feminist institutionalism offers important theoretical tools to analyse changes within research institutions, highlighting the limitations that adopting a gender equality perspective within the frame of “academic

performativity” (Blackmore and Sachs 2003) brings. One of the central aspects in these reflections is to verify the effectiveness of certain programmes that explicitly aim to produce organizational transformation in terms of gender in the structures, cultures, and work practices of academic and scientific contexts. The analysis of some programmatic strategies for gender equality in these spaces has shown that their effectiveness is often compromised by gender practices embedded in daily interactions within academic and scientific institutions (O’Connor 2020). An example of this is the well-known Athena SWAN programme (Scientific Women’s Academic Network - AS), a kind of certification that Anglo-Saxon and Irish academic institutions and research bodies receive based on their performance in promoting gender equality; this programme can be considered a precursor to Gender Equality Plans. Several studies have highlighted that, although AS has initiated reflection on the subject, it has had very limited effectiveness in promoting gender equality in science production contexts, even quantitatively (consider, for example, the increase in the number of women in leadership positions) (*Ibidem*). Furthermore, these programmes have introduced forms of “moderate/liberal feminism” that are useful in responding to the accountability needs of the neoliberal university based on measurable metrics and performance rather than on effective changes in gender orders (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). In this regard, Yarrow and Johnston (2023) speak of “institutional peacocking” to signal the self-celebratory attitude resulting from having implemented gender equality policies, regardless of the actual results achieved with these measures. Some authors also note that very often the policymaking, implementation, and evaluation processes from a gender perspective are highly bureaucratized and cause an extra burden specifically on female staff and on the precarious component within universities and research bodies (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019; Drew 2022). This aspect is linked to another critical and equally central element: the lack of an intersectional perspective that takes into account the complexity and variability of experienced inequalities,

where gender intersects with other asymmetries, exposing different subjectivities to discrimination: women, individuals with non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations, individuals with disabilities, or racialized individuals (Pearce 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019).

Regarding the adoption of a critical perspective on GEPs, the literature dedicated to them is still rather scant, given their recent implementation. However, several contributions have highlighted some interesting aspects. Firstly, some authors (Clavero and Gilligan 2021) have reflected on the premises underlying the implementation of Plans, focused more on economic motivations than on social justice, and on their effects in terms of effectively promoting gender equality. Others (Laoire *et al.* 2021) have highlighted critical aspects of policy standardization processes and assumptions of transferability from one context to another, which do not consider the specificities of individual entities/universities and the broader cultural and situated context. Another element of reflection concerns how policies integrate with gender mainstreaming and with an actual change in the organizational premises from which they originate (Peterson and Jordansson 2022; Rosa 2022). Thomson and colleagues (2022) have also highlighted how important it is to adopt a collaborative approach between individuals, but also between institutions and countries to effectively implement GEPs. Finally, except for *ad hoc* exceptions (Drew and Bencivenga 2017), there is a lack of comparison between European experiences on the subject and countries that, although part of the European continent, are not part of the Union.

Following the past year, where almost all Italian and European universities and research bodies have adopted GEPs, it seemed useful and important to conduct an initial assessment, on one hand, highlighting the potential, results, and processes initiated thanks to the measures contained in the GEPs, and on the other hand, highlighting possible aporias, criticalities, and resistances linked to the implementation of the Plans.

The papers presented in the following pages enrich the critical reflections on the subject, analysing the various levels involved in GEPs: implementation processes, underlying assumptions in planning, meanings and perspectives, as well as evaluation processes. Analyses of this kind are essential to understand and overcome the critical issues that hinder the full implementation of gender equity principles in academia, in a national and international climate that still shows resistance to the gender construct and the transformative potential it evokes.

2. GEPs Universities: Implementations, Challenges, and Evaluation Processes

The contributions gathered in this special issue outline an analytical framework, stemming from diverse objectives, related to the drafting and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) within universities. They focus on three areas of interest: actions for integrating gender perspectives into research and education, implementation processes, and the relationships between GEP content and the broader social context.

Tindara Addabbo, Ester Cois, and Ilenia Picardi present a qualitative study of GEPs published by 26 Italian universities from 2021 to 2022. The study aims to understand how and whether a strategic tool like the GEP can mark tangible improvement towards gender equality. The authors concentrated on analysing 170 actions concerning the integration of a gender perspective in both research and education. The aim is twofold: to understand how European indications in this regard have been received and translated, and to contemplate the actual capacity of actions adopted so far to trigger transformative processes within the Italian academic world. The article explores how gender and gender equality in teaching and research are institutionalized and translated by universities into actions adopted within the GEPs, along with the accompanying motivations. This analysis is crucial to identify criticalities that could hinder the transformation process of

academic institutions towards gender equity, particularly significant during this early phase of GEP implementation in Italian universities.

The research analyses some GEPs of Italian universities - 11 from Northern, 7 from Central and 8 from Southern Italy, which vary in size (mega, large, medium, and small) - and proposes a typology of the actions adopted, both in research and education.

The analysis reveals that, within the goal of “integrating the gender dimension into research”, the concept of ‘gender’ is defined as:

- i) an object of research;
- ii) a research perspective;
- iii) the gender of research group participants; and
- iv) the gender of participants in research communication events. All actions proposed in this specific area move in these four directions, with a particular focus on the second dimension, i.e. gender as a research perspective, that accounts for 40% of implemented actions.

Fewer actions are, instead, dedicated to integrating the gender dimension into teaching and in this case, gender is perceived as:

- i) a study topic;
- ii) an analytical perspective;
- iii) an inclusion perspective in higher education access; iv) an inclusion perspective in teaching methods; and v) the gender of participants in scientific communication; there is a prevalence (45% of actions) for the area “gender as an analytical perspective”.

Finally, the authors emphasize that the scarcity of actions within the GEPs in the two examined areas makes the path towards genuine gender equality certainly more complex. The meanings attributed to the concept of ‘gender’ in the GEPs are also critically analysed: not only is it introduced as a binary category (m/f), but it also allows little room for an intersectional interpretation of asymmetries present in academic contexts, neglecting the interaction between gender and

other identity dimensions (age, economic status, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation to name a few). It is also suggested to look at Italy in its regional heterogeneity, which, as highlighted in the analysis, often does not occur from the contextual analysis introducing the GEPs and is often not integrated with data related to equality indicators at regional and sub-regional levels.

From a perspective that combines preliminary monitoring and critical analysis, Mary Lou O'Neil proposes an interesting analysis of the adoption of GEPs by Turkish universities. Through a quali-quantitative approach, the research assesses the actual presence of GEPs within Turkish universities (both public and private) and whether these documents adhere to the EU requirements for accessing research funding programmes. On one hand, the objective is to understand the assumptions underlying university organizations and the gender-related meanings that form the basis of GEPs. On the other hand, it aims to gauge to what extent GEPs propose to transform gender practices within universities.

The paper, in the first section, illustrates how the gender dimension is present in higher education in Turkey, both in terms of the presence of women in universities and regarding the meanings that the concept of gender has held over time, particularly focusing on how it is currently a concept generating deeply rooted resistance in Turkish territory. Then, the author presents and discusses the results of the quali-quantitative analysis of currently effective GEPs in Turkish universities. The author demonstrates how the Turkish case is particularly interesting both because Turkey has a high presence of women in the academic world (men constitute the majority in public universities, while women are the majority in private institutions), and because of the progressive diffusion, in recent years, of the so-called anti-gender discourse (Garbagnoli 2014) - at times violent and aggressive, as in other European Countries. The author highlights that, in the Turkish case, the meanings attributed to gender are considered not compatible with the dominant values and traditions; a fact that determined the denial of the authorization for

the opening of new programmes and research centres using the term ‘gender’ in their names, and the requirement to alter the name of existing programmes.

Initiating pathways of transformation within academic institutions, as envisaged in the objectives of GEPs, in contexts where “anti-gender” discourses are pervasive, is thus complex, especially when the very meanings of gender and gender equality are being questioned.

Through the analysis of 36 GEPs (the total available in Turkey at the time of the research, from 204 universities) conducted between December 2022 and February 2023, several issues emerge show various challenges: from the difficulty to locate the GEPs on the website, to the problem of accessibility concerning language since most of them are in English; from the lack of dedicated resources for the actions included in GEPs to the significant deficiencies in presenting disaggregated gender-specific data.

Regarding the actions adopted, training appears as an effort aimed at awareness activities without a proper contextual analysis or a long-term plan with clear intervention goals on the environment and organizational culture. Even actions dedicated to balancing life and work present a partial view: the emphasis is on the (heterosexual) family, and the focus is on the needs of mother-women, rarely including men. Two other axes of interventions present in the analysed GEPs are power roles and recruitment processes. In the former case, the underlying theoretical assumption guiding action planning seems to suggest that women are “doing something wrong”, necessitating guidance for them to access leadership positions. Regarding recruitment, only one institution acknowledged the existence of barriers to women’s advancement within academic careers. The analysis ends with a section dedicated to preventing violence against women, where the reference to ‘women’ is explicit and does not encompass actions dedicated to gender-based violence more broadly.

The study, then, illustrates how institutions adopting this tool in Turkey are not undertaking the kind of institutional transformation necessary to begin a path towards gender equality. The actions leave unchanged the practices inherent in organizational cultures that generate discrimination and asymmetries; each action seems to refer to women, where ‘woman’ responds to a restrictive and non-intersectional definition.

The contribution that concludes this special issue shifts focus from the content of GEPs to evaluating the implementation process. Mariasole Bannò, Anna Brescianini, and Camilla Federici address the theme of inclusive governance as an engine for institutional change and gender equality in universities. The research presents and discusses a participatory process of drafting the GEP through a qualitative analysis of the experience at the University of Brescia, to propose a methodology for evaluating this process in universities. The authors reflect whether the participatory process enhances the effectiveness of implementing Gender Equality Plans in universities, based on a theoretical framework that sees hierarchical decision-making as a limit to the path towards gender equality.

After a first section dedicated to the description of the case study of the University of Brescia, the authors operationalise the concept of inclusive governance and its implementation through a participatory governance process, understood as a decision-making and management process involving all stakeholders of the academic community in policy formulation, activity planning, and organizational decision-making. The objective is to integrate diverse perspectives and skills to make decisions that are widely shared and, by analysing these interactions, identify any resistances in institutions that are not gender-neutral, to understand the obstacles towards actual parity.

The evaluation tool presented in the research includes both qualitative and quantitative parts aimed at monitoring the inclusive governance process through

two analytical approaches. Qualitatively, problems related to the ‘quality’ of participation in terms of activity, initiative, and sharing are investigated through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The outcomes are examined to determine whether and how they align with the idea presented by all participating stakeholders. The cohesion and cooperation process among participants is also analysed.

Regarding the quantitative analysis, the study proposes adopting two different questionnaires for two different targets: the first directed at academic, administrative, and technical staff to evaluate the actions implemented within the University, and the second for key subjects, defined by their involvement in governing bodies, committees, or scientific workshops, to investigate their perception regarding gender equality issues in academia.

The study’s evidence suggest that a participatory process is an important and necessary condition for drafting a GEP and, above all, ensuring its effectiveness. Constructing an ongoing evaluation method, considering the specificities of each university, could represent a useful tool to improve the process itself. This would make it recognized, visible, and potentially more effective by addressing the emergent issues.

3. Concluding Remarks: Future Paths for Research

Gender Equality Plans are still a relatively recent phenomenon in Europe, about which, for now, limited reflections can be made, but they have a heuristic potential - especially concerning changes in academia - that should not be underestimated.

On one hand, especially in Italy, they have represented a substantial turning point, lifting the veil that, until recently and for a long time, has normalized gender inequalities in academia, marking a further step towards institutionalizing a gender perspective in universities. On the other hand, they have contributed to

revealing resistance and the low legitimacy recognized for this perspective, particularly when it sheds light on disparities and the ‘dysfunctional’ aspects of academic work.

GEPs have made the university both an object of analysis and policy, thematizing it as a workplace where gender segregation forms in a way that characterizes the labour market more generally.

While O’Neill’s paper has highlighted some of the assumptions underlying their implementation, there remain some areas warranting further investigation. For example, it would be interesting to understand whether and to what extent GEPs have triggered the profound institutional change envisaged, given the rather tight timelines with which Gender Equality Plans were introduced. Indeed, the political agreement on Horizon Europe 2021-2027 was reached on 11th December 2020, and the implementation of the GEP became a requirement for accessing European funds from the following year, which accelerated the adoption of the Plans but also led to extreme standardization. This certainly has had positive aspects in terms of comparability between Plans and individual actions, but it should not be forgotten that best practices in policymaking are not always immediately transferable between different realities, and it is essential to adapt interventions to specific contexts. Tailoring actions to the needs and peculiarities of individual universities could allow for more creativity and the possibility of imagining truly innovative measures. Moreover, it could mean planning actions for the short, medium, and long term, not overly confined to the present and the ‘urgency’ derived from the need to comply with European constraints.

In the context of implementation and the rapid adoption of GEPs, it would be useful to delve into how their adoption has taken the form of mere administrative compliance, driven primarily by economic logics or more or less explicit forms of pinkwashing, rather than by a true recognition of the importance of the issues contained in the Plans. Importance accorded and commitment of the governance

of the universities would have to be analysed, among other things, considering the economic coverage provided for the implementation of GEP activities, for which often no contribution has been allocated.

In relation to the processes of construction and implementation, the path described by Bannò and colleagues sheds light on the potential of participatory processes: in this sense, it would be helpful to apply their proposal to other cases and compare it with other experiences developed in different universities. The issue of evaluation, whether *in itinere* or *ex post*, remains an open question, lacking codified tools and indicators that allow GEPs to become truly operational tools capable of reducing gender inequalities and discriminations.

Regarding how these issues intersect and are perceived in a neoliberal academic context where ‘excellence’ and ‘merit’ are the dominant keywords, seen as gender-neutral dimensions, is another point of great interest. In environments where there is a strong belief that only merit should be rewarded and that this is the only principle guiding every evaluation, selection, and promotion process, discussing measures for reducing the glass ceiling and vertical segregation becomes very difficult. These measures risk being perceived as contrary to processes considered meritocratic. A similar argument applies to the pursuit of excellence, which, in this view, cannot and should not respond to equality and justice logics. The connections between merit/excellence and the goals of reducing gender inequalities within GEPs are interesting from an analytical standpoint but also in terms of the possible adverse effects that this clash can generate, giving rise to forms of resistance around GEPs. These resistances could potentially broaden to encompass gender-related issues and policies more generally. This is particularly relevant in contexts like the one analysed by O’Neill, but also in the Italian context, where anti-gender movements and a strong conservative right-wing and Catholic presence remain relevant.

On the opposite side, potential critical voices from feminist and gender studies should be studied. These could highlight other adverse effects of introducing GEPs, such as the risk of ‘normalizing’ the revolutionary impact of some feminist theoretical principles and reflections.

Regarding the contents of the Plans, the contribution of Addabbo and colleagues demonstrated how the notion of ‘gender’ itself can be interpreted in many ways and can assume various forms in practical applications. It would be worthwhile to understand how many GEPs adopt a non-binary gender perspective or include an intersectional perspective that looks not only at how gender intersects with other forms of discrimination (due to disability, racialization, etc.) but also, more generally, at the processes of marginalization of other social groups. In short, it is worth understanding, on one side, to what extent GEPs recognize that the academic world often produces inequalities based on other dimensions such as social class or geographical origin. On the other, how much the importance of integrating a gender perspective in research and teaching also takes into account the internal inequalities within academic staff derived from hierarchies among knowledge that see gender studies - and those who deal with it - often still delegitimized (Cannito and Mercuri 2023).

A further element highlighted by Addabbo, Cois and Picardi, which only recent research has considered (see Naldini and Poggio 2023), which always relates to inequalities and is particularly relevant especially in Italy, is the issue of differences between universities. Different sizes and territorial locations result in a variability of constraints and opportunities in the adoption and implementation of Gender Equality Plans, often exacerbated by national competitions that ‘reward’ with additional funding Departments deemed excellent.

If many cases reveal these shortcomings around Gender Equality Plans, it might be useful to understand whether they have also contrarily represented an opportunity for change, introducing innovative work and intervention practices and

providing space for new analytical perspectives. At the same time, it would be interesting to understand if GEPs have opened new channels of dialogue between various components of the academic world (students, faculty, administrative staff) and between the various internal levels of universities, as well as between organizations producing science and between universities and the activism world. Moreover, a comparison at the European level and possibly with countries outside the EU should be further explored.

These processes might have served as an opportunity to raise awareness on gender issues for the academic world as a whole and a chance to put gender mainstreaming into practice, thus fostering a broader awareness of the gendered effects of a series of practices, policies, and organizational aspects that seem apparently neutral.

Finally, it is worth asking whether, through these communication exchanges, shared expertise and competencies have been generated. These answers, supported by stable economic resources and dedicated institutional figures, can provide continuity and stability to actions aimed at reducing inequalities in academia.

In conclusion, we believe that it is important to deepen the study of Gender Equality Plans, both in Italy and in the rest of Europe, to explicitly articulate the political and not just 'technical' character of these tools. This would clarify that gender inequalities are not part of the 'natural' course of academic life but are the result of specific choices, constraints, and responsibilities that cannot be attributed to women and minorities in general. Instead, they must be recognized and named as collective, structural, and sociocultural characteristics.

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